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### Coronavirus Pandemic: A Reflection

“Do you think they will cancel Coachella?” Hailey nervously inquired. Grace quickly retorted, “What? No way! *Coachella*? Are you kidding?” I witnessed this conversation amongst my friends on March 9, 2020, a Tuesday in the second week of what has since come to be known as the longest month in our civilization’s history. I first remember hearing about the novel coronavirus in late January, only briefly though, with reporters citing Wuhan, China as the locus of the outbreak. Soon thereafter, however, doctors all around the world began documenting increasing numbers of deaths due to the coronavirus. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of January, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency, but their announcement fell largely on deaf ears. Global leaders failed to heed the alarm and respond appropriately, as did regular civilians; no one seemed to take the declaration seriously. This pervasive nonchalance explains why on March 9<sup>th</sup>, teenagers still found themselves questioning whether or not to purchase their Coachella outfits. But, as the infectious spread showed no sign of slowing, particularly in China and Italy, people finally began to confront the pandemic. Within only a few days, academic institutions closed, offices ordered their staff to work from home, and governors ordered state-wide lockdowns, only allowing people to leave for essential items, such as food and medicine. And so began the most profound historical moment of the twenty-first century.

In the first half of March, I found myself constantly refreshing my email and Twitter page, hoping to read updates on how the virus would impact UCLA’s academic instruction and policies. More specifically, I waited for notifications from Chancellor Gene Block, who, by then,

emailed the entire student body almost daily to provide us with news on any recent developments and changes. What began as informal notes urging the campus community to practice increased hygiene quickly morphed into notices of transition to online learning platforms, first until April 10<sup>th</sup>, but later for the remainder of Spring and Summer quarters. Succeeding those messages were alerts that some Bruins tested positive for Covid-19, that the academic committee decided to virtualize commencement ceremonies (though this decision was later reversed after much resistance from students), that students could opt to take classes pass/no pass to relieve undue academic burden or stress, and, more personally, that my Paris study abroad adventure was cancelled. Given the closure of campus, I began receiving emails from my Spring professors, as well as my sorority president and other club leaders, in which they detailed their respective commitments to maintaining their presences in some virtual capacity. In short, it was immediately clear that everyone was working diligently to make the online transition as seamless as possible. And, to be fair, everyone did a fantastic job: within a mere week, professors sent out adapted syllabi with more accommodating grading scales, and Greek and club presidents shared revised calendars for the quarter's Zoom meetings. While I am incredibly grateful for everyone's collective efforts, I am saddened by the fact that my sophomore year ended in such an abrupt manner. With each new class I take in a given quarter, I truly immerse myself in the "traditional" classroom experience. In other words, I attend every class and, through office hours, discussion sections, and even break-out groups in lecture, I try to form relationships with my instructors and peers. I am a very active learner and, thus, sitting at home watching a pre-recorded lecture seems passive and dispassionate to me. That said, my dissatisfaction at what this quarter mutated into is mitigated by my acknowledgement of the fact that UCLA is only acting in civil society's best interest—i.e. aggressively social distancing will undoubtedly flatten the curve and save

thousands of lives. Thus, while I believe the quality of my education has suffered amidst the pandemic, my grievances essentially cease there; I am one of the lucky ones.

Unlike the majority of university students confronting these societal changes, my life has fortunately been relatively unaltered. For instance, most of my friends moved to Westwood from other parts of the state or country, or even from an entirely different hemisphere. Thus, throughout the week where we received a steady influx of emails, each of which either amended or contradicted previous messages, they stood in an uncertain limbo, unsure of whether to stay near campus or fly home. By contrast, my family home is in Westwood and I have lived at home for my entire sophomore year. Therefore, I did not face a hasty, stressful move-out or struggle to renegotiate a leasing contract. My academic life really only changed in the sense that all scholastic instruction became reduced to the domestic sphere and that I can no longer read and study at UCLA libraries. The latter disruption is heightened by the fact that, given my parents now work from home and my younger brother now studies from home, I do not possess the most serene academic environment, but I still recognize my incredibly privileged position. On the social spectrum, moreover, my life has slowed dramatically, and this situation is not unique to me. As the days of meeting up with friends at coffee shops, beaches, and parks are presently prohibited, I find myself spending most of my time completing academic assignments, reading, walking around my neighborhood, and watching *The Mindy Project* (which I highly recommend!). I have also incorporated new activities into my daily life, such as painting with friends over Zoom or playing board games with my family, all pursuits that I seemingly “never had time for” pre-lockdown. Furthermore, unlike the 30 million Americans who have filed for

unemployment insurance, my parents thankfully retained their jobs.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I am not facing any serious economic hardship, for which, again, I am extremely grateful. My acknowledgement of my considerable privilege is not intended to serve as some humble brag or represent some illusive and ultimately fleeting awareness of my status; rather, my lucid cognizance has produced personal gratitude and directly informed the ways in which I choose to conduct my life during this tumultuous period.

Appreciating my immense personal privilege has allowed me to consider what I can do to help those that are less advantaged than me. For one, I am conscious that I am not in an “at-risk” cohort for losing my life to coronavirus: I am young and do not suffer from any preexisting respiratory condition. However, my own relative (for lack of a better term) “immunity” or unlikelihood of dying from coronavirus does not preclude me from practicing strict social distancing rules. I, and others like me, cannot continue to live as we did before. We must only leave the house to obtain essential goods for ourselves and our families, offer to pick up groceries for elders in our neighborhoods, or go on walks for a breath of fresh air and to avoid going stir-crazy. We must think about the risks others in our community may be facing, and thus actively avoid coming in contact with them. In addition, being able to find shelter in my home, forgo work, and practice the advised social distancing guidelines places me in yet another minority group. Every day, healthcare workers such as doctors, nurses, and support staff, as well as grocery store and take-out restaurant employees, prove their exceptional selflessness, putting themselves in perilous environments to serve the community’s needs. By staying at home and limiting all social contact, we can work to limit the spread of the coronavirus and alleviate some

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<sup>1</sup>Anneken Tappe, “30 million Americans have filed initial unemployment claims since mid-March,” CNN Business, CNN, last modified April 30, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/30/economy/unemployment-benefits-coronavirus/index.html>.

of the strain that currently burdens the health care system. Put simply, those of us who are in more fortunate positions than others around us must be diligent in doing “our part” to keep the community healthy and safe.

A detail that I find interesting about this strange period is that I constantly hear people remark that “humanity has seen nothing like this” or that “we are navigating unprecedented waters.” Such statements are fundamentally incorrect and directly point to why the study of history is so vital. Indeed, looking back to the past can help present-day civilians understand how our ancestors coped with and ultimately overcame similar traumatic situations. For instance, when Christopher Columbus and other European colonists first invaded America in 1492, they brought with them smallpox, a disease previously unknown in the “Old World.” The epidemic wreaked havoc for the indigenous inhabitants, killing an estimated 90 percent of them, due to a lack of immunity. Tens of other horrendous diseases plagued people all over the world throughout the 1700s, 1800s, and 1900s, but no singular crisis so closely mirrors our current crisis as does the Spanish Flu. This lethal disease, most prevalent from 1918 to 1920, claimed the lives of around 50 million people, placing the death rate at 1 to 2 percent globally.<sup>2</sup> While world leaders attempted to battle the spread, they ordered the construction of emergency hospitals and the distribution of masks, and laymen and women acted in accord, closing stores, postponing funerals, and quarantining indoors. Societies all over the world overcame these grave conditions by prioritizing the collective need for health and safety above any personal needs. We must pledge to adopt a similar utilitarian approach in order to combat this vicious pandemic.

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<sup>2</sup> Dave Roos, “Why the Second Wave of the 1918 Spanish Flu Was So Deadly,” History Stories, 2020 A&E Television Networks, LLC, last modified April 29, 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/spanish-flu-second-wave-resurgence>.

The age of coronavirus is best defined as a period of heightened anxiety, paranoia, and uncertainty amongst the world's general population. Scientists are predicting hundreds of thousands of deaths in the United States alone, and questions in regard to when quarantine will end, when a semblance of normalcy will return, and what a post-corona world resembles are all too obscure and unpredictable to be answered appropriately in the present climate. While apocalyptic conditions surround us and a genuine understanding of the future evades us, we—humanity—cannot falter in the face of this crucible. As Teo instructs us, we must “dare to be happy” and cannot “postpone joy,” all while maintaining the social distancing recommendations. We need to make the most of being indoors, whether it be by hanging out with the family around us, “Zooming” with friends, picking up a new hobby, or journaling our experiences. We must confront this pandemic with the seriousness it warrants and the dignity we deserve. If we are successful in doing so, we will mitigate at least some of the tragic social and economic devastation and, finally, be able to leave our damn houses.